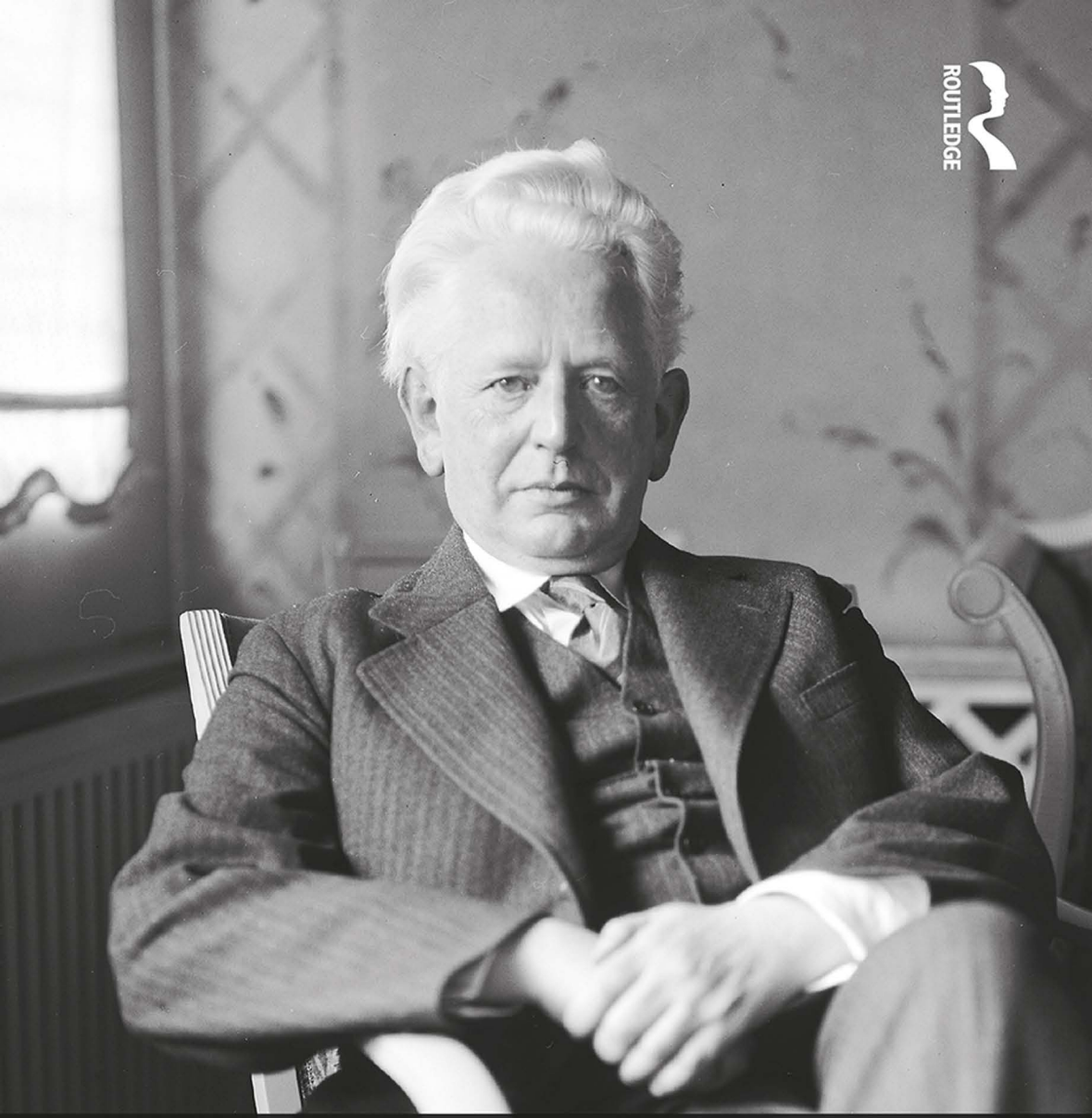

THE PHILOSOPHY OF SYMBOLIC FORMS

Ernst Cassirer

Volume 2: Mythical Thinking

The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 2: Mythical Thinking

"*The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is one of the landmarks of twentieth century philosophy. Drawing from the influential work of Wilhelm Dilthey, it transformed neo-Kantianism into a new robust philosophy of culture. The second volume, on Mythical Thinking, analyzes the fundamental layers of perception and expression as well as the articulations with religion and the dialectic with other forms, essentially language and art.

The intellectual breadth of the volume is remarkable. It initiated the debate with Martin Heidegger and prompted a long-lasting meditation by Hans Blumenberg. We are only beginning to recognize its importance for our understanding of the power of images in the construction of aesthetics, the self, and the socio-political world. It initiated a discussion within French sociology (Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss) that ultimately resurfaced in Pierre Bourdieu, while today it is considered as a resourceful path for cultural and critical theory (Drucilla Cornell and Kenneth M. Panfilio). Finally, this volume also offers solid grounds for a political critique of Nazism – specifically: Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the 20th Century* and Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* – as well as the new emerging totalitarian ideologies."

Fabien Capeilleres, Professor of Philosophy, editor of the French edition of Cassirer's Works

This new translation makes Cassirer's seminal work available to a new generation of scholars. Each volume includes a translator's introduction by Steve G. Lofts, a foreword by Peter E. Gordon, a glossary of key terms, and an index.

Ernst Cassirer was born in Germany 1874 in the city of Breslau (now Wroclaw, Poland). He taught at Hamburg University from 1919 to 1933, and then at All Souls College, Oxford, before emigrating to Sweden and then to the United States. Through its creative interpretation of Kant's philosophy combined with a deep knowledge of the role of language and culture, Cassirer's work is regarded as indispensable to understanding the relationship between the two major traditions in twentieth-century philosophy, the "analytic" and the "continental". Cassirer's philosophy is unique, as it sought a common

ground between the scientific and humanistic worldviews which frequently divided these two traditions, exemplified in his famous debate with Martin Heidegger at Davos in 1929. His work resulted in the monumental *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* as well as several books on the philosophy of humanism and the Enlightenment. He taught at the universities of Yale and Columbia in the early 1940s and died in New York in 1945.

Steve G. Lofts is Professor of Philosophy at King's University College, Canada. He is the translator of Cassirer's *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences* and *The Warburg Years (1919–1933): Essays on Language, Art, Myth, and Technology*.

The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Volume 2

Mythical Thinking

Ernst Cassirer
Translated by Steve G. Lofts

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Foreword

Peter E. Gordon

Some works of philosophy reflect the time in which they were written, others recall an earlier age, and still others seem to anticipate a time yet to come. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* has suffered the peculiar fate of a work that seemed *unzeitgemäß*, or out of tune with its time. First published in the 1920s during the brief and troubled era of the Weimar Republic, it was intended for a cultured readership that was either rapidly disappearing or had not yet appeared, an intellectual world in which the memory of German Idealism could still inspire and the last embers of European humanism had not ceased to glow. Its author, Ernst Cassirer, belonged to that distinctive stratum of the German-Jewish bourgeoisie, a small fragment of the Central European educated classes or *Bildungsbürgertum* for whom culture had become a kind of ersatz religion and who held fast to the values of Universalism and the Enlightenment even as the surrounding culture succumbed to nationalism and intolerance. Cassirer was among the hundreds of thousands of intellectuals and artists whose careers in Germany came to an end by the brutal fiat of National Socialist legislation in 1933. He fled with his wife into exile, and after two years in Oxford and a longer stay in Göteborg, Sweden, he spent his final years in the United States. Since his death in 1945, his philosophical legacy has survived in the uncertain twilight of a culture that can no longer identify with his ideals. But no work of philosophy should suffer the ignominy of being turned into a mere monument of the past. The crucial question is whether we can still read it today and, if so, how.

"The human mind," wrote Goethe, "will not be confined to any limits." Cassirer was Goethe's spiritual stepchild. His masterpiece, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, was a belated contribution to a philosophical genre that Goethe would have admired, especially for its readiness to break with academic convention by exploring all domains of human expression, from language to myth, from religion to science. Cassirer came from an accomplished family of artists and scientists: among his cousins were Richard, an esteemed neurologist, and Paul, a gallery owner and art collector who played a major role in promoting the works of the Berlin Secession and Postimpressionists such as Van Gogh and Cézanne. In his philosophy, these seemingly disparate domains are understood as stemming from a common source, the expressive capacity or formative principle that belongs to the human being as an *animal symbolicum*. For Cassirer, the mind is not a passive faculty that merely receives impressions from the external world but rather an active faculty that constitutes those impressions by investing them with order and meaning. The symbolic is the very principle of intelligibility whose powers leave nothing untouched. As it presses outward into all domains of experience, the mind comes to recognize itself in its own symbolic achievements. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* is nothing less than the philosophical record of these efforts.

Cassirer came to this task well equipped with conceptual instruments that he had already honed to precision after years of philosophical research. His earlier works reflect a rigorous training in the philosophical methods associated with Hermann Cohen and the so-called Marburg School of neo-Kantianism, which first emerged in the last quarter of the nineteenth century as a philosophical reaction against the preceding age of metaphysical extravagance. The neo-Kantians were a diverse group but united in the conviction that philosophy could only move forward only if it went "back to Kant," and this meant reconceiving philosophy as a rigorous inquiry into the transcendental conditions for objective knowledge. Thanks to the reawakening of Kant's philosophy at Marburg, Cassirer first turned his attention to the philosophical foundations of the natural sciences. He was especially keen to understand the epistemological principles of classical and modern physics, in which obsolete and metaphysical concepts of "substance" had been gradually supplanted by modern concepts of pure "function." In Einstein's theory of relativity,

for example, our basic concepts cannot be construed as mere "copies" of immediate material data; they are instead "represented as constructed projects" of our own thinking. The concept of being is replaced by the concept of order.

This insight into the epistemological revolution in modern physics first permitted Cassirer to realize the unique importance of the symbolic. In the early 1920s, Cassirer also made the acquaintance of Aby Warburg, whose unusual library at Hamburg became a kind of spiritual home and the place where he came to appreciate the richness and diversity of world culture and mythological belief. In fact, it would not be misleading to describe *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* as an attempt to provide the Warburg Library with a transcendental foundation. Here Cassirer presented his famous address, "The Concept of Symbolic Form in the Construction of the Human Sciences" (his inaugural publication for the Warburg Library), in which he laid out his definition of a symbolic form as "every energy of spirit by which the content of spiritual signification is linked to a concrete and intrinsically appropriate sensuous sign."[1] Symbolic forms serve as the common intellectual framework for all systems of human meaning – in myth, religion, language, and science – all of which bear witness to the idea that "our consciousness does not content itself with receiving impressions from the outside, rather it links and penetrates every impression with a free activity of expression."[2] When they are understood as the fruit of human symbolization, even the most "primitive" or "irrational" moments in human culture are revealed as belonging to a shared world of "self-created signs and images."

In *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, this general principle serves as the point of departure for a transcendental inquiry into the most diverse forms of symbolic expression. However, we must not mistake this project for a mindless celebration of cultural diversity that would blur all essential distinctions between science and myth, reason and unreason. Cassirer is committed to a deeper and more expansive kind of rationalism – a humanism without limits. But he organizes his philosophical inquiry in a developmentalist narrative that charts the self-education of the human species. We can think of the book as an attempt to historicize the Kantian theory of form: myth can play a crucial role in the structuring of experience only until it yields dialectically to the more sophisticated symbolic

forms of monotheistic religion, and in the very same way religion must yield to the consciously self-created forms of modern science. In this narrative of symbolization, each stage is assigned a suitable role, though none of them can compromise the underlying narrative of human enlightenment. Unsurprisingly, the third volume of Cassirer's project is called *The Phenomenology of Cognition*, an implicit homage to the Hegelian idea of a phenomenology as a story of the mind's progressive efforts to achieve the fullest and most rational form of self-realization. For Cassirer, as for his German idealist antecedents, this narrative of self-realization is not only epistemological but also cultural and political: the human being comes to know itself only if it also comes to recognize itself as the author of its own fate. Cassirer's work thus implies a strong commitment to modern democracy.

Nearly a century has passed since the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* appeared in 1923, and over this broad timespan, certain features of Cassirer's work have grown antiquated and unpersuasive. For those who can no longer accept Enlightenment-inspired appeals to progress in a modern world that made Auschwitz a possibility, the evolutionist principle that underwrites Cassirer's philosophy may seem altogether intolerable. But we should not hasten to dismiss him too quickly as a thinker from a more optimistic age. At the end of his life, in his last and posthumously published study, *The Myth of the State* (1945), he acknowledged the contemporary power of modern political myths, such as those that had become official ideology in the Third Reich. He specifically warns that these myths are not organic products of the human mind; although ancient myths served proto-rational aims, the modern myths are artificial things that can be manufactured at will. It is an insight that he shared with the philosophers of the Frankfurt School, who compressed the dialectic of regression into an aphorism: "myth is already enlightenment, but Enlightenment reverts to myth." Nor should we neglect the striking affinities that connect Cassirer's philosophy of language and myth to later themes in French structuralism. A neglected line of argument runs from Cassirer's analysis of the symbolic forms of mythical thinking to the unconscious rules of totemism and myth examined by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his structuralist anthropology.

Cassirer's philosophy also anticipates a methodological perspective that we now associate with Michel Foucault. The suggestion is not as

surprising as it may seem. Foucault was quite familiar with Cassirer's work, and in 1966 he even wrote a review of Cassirer's study of the Enlightenment. That same year, he also published *Les mots et les choses* (known in English as *The Order of Things*), and readers of the book may note its resemblance with *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. Both are attempts to excavate the *a priori* structures that manifest themselves in all spheres of human culture and knowledge. Moreover, both insist that these *a priori* structures or symbolic forms are not historically invariant but instead susceptible to radical changes over time. In documenting these tectonic shifts, Cassirer not infrequently characterizes them in Aristotelian terms as a "μετάβασις εἰς ἄλλο γένος," or a transition into an entirely different genus. What Foucault called an "archaeology of knowledge" involves a similar emphasis on the discontinuity between one episteme and another. Notwithstanding this remarkable similarity, however, there is at least one crucial difference: Foucault sees these *a priori* structures as *anonymous*. They appear all at once, as if from nowhere, and he has little interest in offering a metaphysical explanation for their point of origin. Unlike Cassirer, he refuses to see them as manifestations of the formative power of human consciousness, since he regards all such appeals to transcendental humanism with the deepest skepticism. The expressive model of human consciousness that serves as the grounds of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms is, from Foucault's perspective, merely a surface phenomenon of a uniquely modern episteme that may soon disappear. This places Foucault in a difficult position of affirming structures of meaning while disavowing human consciousness as their source. With this paradoxical doctrine, Foucault takes his place in a long tradition of modern critiques of transcendental humanism that extend back at least as far as Heidegger. But we might ask ourselves whether it is plausible to speak of meaning if one does not offer some account of meaning's genesis. Adopting an attitude of knowing condescension toward seemingly obsolete doctrines of transcendental humanism is easier than supplying a worthy alternative.

This was a major bone of contention in the famous 1929 confrontation between Cassirer and Heidegger in Davos, Switzerland. If Heidegger appeared to many eyewitnesses as the victor in this dispute, this was because he was willing to abandon the doctrine of transcendental humanism that had remained a dominant fixture in modern academic

philosophy at least since Kant. Cassirer, by contrast, had little interest in surrendering this doctrine, since his entire philosophy was premised on the notion that symbolic forms are the manifestation of the "pure activity of spirit." Without this notion, he feared that the ideal of objectivity in both scientific knowledge and ethics would collapse. Unlike Heidegger, he emphasized mental spontaneity, the mind's uninhibited freedom in the constitution of its world. Cassirer accused Heidegger of turning his back on objectivity and retreating into a kind of pragmatic relativism where space and time were reduced to merely "existential" categories without objective form.

History has not been kind to Cassirer, but we should ask ourselves if his criticism was so wide of the mark. It was Cassirer, after all, who grasped the philosophical implications of the natural sciences and especially modern mathematics and physics, whereas Heidegger betrayed the superficiality of his thinking on all such matters when he declared that "science does not think." Today when so many of our contemporary problems confront us with the need to move beyond the unfortunate divide between the natural sciences and the humanities, Cassirer's philosophy may offer greater promise. All the same, Heidegger may have been right to suggest that the old dogma of transcendental humanism could not be sustained without a covert appeal to metaphysics. Cassirer occasionally reads as if he meant to give up on metaphysics to develop a kind of phenomenology without foundationalism. But most of these gestures are only half-convincing. The urgent point of dispute at Davos remained unsolved: can there be objectivity without metaphysics?

One solution was developed by philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas, who delivered a lecture in Hamburg in 1995 on the dual occasion of the rededication of the Warburg Library and the fiftieth anniversary of Cassirer's death. Habermas expressed in his lecture great admiration for Cassirer and extoled him as a champion of democracy and Enlightenment at a moment in German history when such champions were all too few. But he also suggested that *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* did not succeed in liberating itself from the conventional paradigm of a "philosophy of consciousness." For Habermas, the philosophy of consciousness is the name for any philosophical doctrine that describes meaning from the isolated perspective of a transcendental subject who

comes to know the world primarily through representations. Over the course of the twentieth century, many philosophers have come to see this paradigm as antiquated and indefensible, chiefly because it relies on a crypto-metaphysical conception of a transcendental subject who stands beyond its own field of operation. It serves as the grounds of meaning but can give no account of its own genesis. Habermas tries to resolve this dilemma without following the path of metaphysical skeptics such as Heidegger and Foucault. Instead, he understands objective meaning as the shared creation of an irreducible plurality of subjects who build up the world through intersubjective communication and praxis. This solution helps to secure the objectivity of our language and our moral-political commitments even though it is an objectivity that has dispensed with the need for metaphysical grounds. This ideal of an intersubjectively validated objectivity derives originally from the German idealists, but one can glimpse in Cassirer's thinking a certain anticipation of Habermas' solution.

The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms is an ambivalent work that sits at the boundary between two epochs in the history of philosophy. It points in the direction of a post-metaphysical theory of the symbolic without wholly liberating itself from the older paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness. We can occasionally glimpse its author as he struggles to overcome his own philosophical inheritance, even if its authority remains too strong. This may help to explain the strange feeling of untimeliness that seems to emanate from the pages of this unusual work. Cassirer himself was a man between epochs, a contemporary of Einstein who could effortlessly call to mind lines of poetry from Schiller and Goethe. Though unashamed of his origins, he was indifferent to the claims of nation and tribe; he saw in Judaism only one source for the rational universalism that was the common inheritance of all cultures. A humanist philosopher in an age of extremes, he was in many ways the supreme representative of a world in eclipse. Although he was fortunate enough to escape the European catastrophe, he did not live long enough to see the new world that would emerge from the ruins. Whether he could have felt at home in this new age of specialization is doubtful. Erudition today is a rare commodity, and it has become just one commodity among others. For good or for ill, philosophers these days no longer have the habit of quoting Goethe. But if we look past

these marks of old-world erudition, we may yet find that *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* can come alive with new insights that even its author may never have anticipated. No genuine work of philosophy belongs only to the past.

ENDNOTES

1 Cf. Cassirer, "The Concept of Symbolic Form in the Construction of the Human Sciences," in *The Warburg Years (1919–1933). Essays on Language, Art, Myth, and Technology*, trans. Steve Lofts with Antonio Calcagno, 76.
2 Ibid., 76.

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I would like to thank Samantha Matherne (Philosophy, Harvard University) for her comments and insights on this Forward.

Translator's Preface

Steve G. Lofts

The following translation has been made from both the original Bruno Cassirer editions and volumes 11, 12, and 13 of the *Gesammelte Werke: Hamburger Ausgabe*, edited by Birgit Recki and with text and notes prepared by Claus Rosenkranz and Julia Clemens. The translation of "'Geist' und 'Leben' in der Philosophie der Gegenwart" ("'Spirit' and 'Life' in Contemporary Philosophy") that appears in the Appendix to Volume 3 of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* has been made from volume 17 of the *Gesammelte Werke: Hamburger Ausgabe*. This paper is mentioned by Cassirer in the Preface to Volume 3 and has been included to provide the reader new to Cassirer with an idea of the problematic that would come to preoccupy him.

The original pagination of the Hamburg edition is found in the margins of the translation. All the footnotes that appear within brackets are translator's notes. As the Hamburg edition is a critical edition, its editorial apparatus is extensive and as such contains a great deal of detailed information. Only the footnotes that seem most appropriate for this translation have been included. Unless a reference to an official English translation appears, all translations of the material quoted in German or French by Cassirer are my own. Official translations have often been amended so that the language of technical terms is consistent. Substantial changes to the translation have been noted. English translations for

the Greek and Latin are included in parentheses where the translation was not given by Cassirer himself.

An attempt has been made to produce a translation that is close and faithful to the original German and to preserve the original feel of Cassirer's voice and style while providing a readable text in contemporary English. Cassirer writes in a clear, elegant, and poetic German. As with any translation, decisions have been made as to when it was more important to remain faithful to the letter of the text and when it was necessary to side with the spirit of the text. Beyond the typical challenges encountered in any translation, the translator of Cassirer is confronted with a particular problem. Other than "symbolic form" and "symbolic pregnance," Cassirer does not coin a new technical language; rather, he employs the language of German Idealism and the technical language of scientific research, bringing a number of thinkers and scientific disciplines into dialogue. He often, however, provides these terms with a new sense. Where possible, the standard translations of these technical terms have been adopted. In some cases, however, there are differences in translation traditions. For example, *Erkenntnisse* is rendered as "knowledge" or "cognition" by different translators. It has, therefore, often been necessary to choose, from among the alternatives, standard translations on the basis of what was the best overall fit in the context of Cassirer's thought.

At times it has been necessary to deviate from standard translations of certain German terms to capture subtle distinctions that would appear to be synonyms and thus would normally be translated by the same English term. Because it is not always possible to translate a German term by using only one English term, in some cases more than one translation has been adopted. Like most philosophers, Cassirer has a tendency to select terms that allow him to make allusions or connect terms through the structure or morphology of the word, such as *Gestalt* (gestalt, figure, or shape), *gestalten* (to configure), and *Gestaltung* (configuration): *Bild* (image), *bilden* (forming), *Bildung* (formation), etc. Where it was thought important to the understanding or simply to the appreciation of the nuances of the text, the German has been included in parentheses.

While a translation should not attempt to remove an author's gender-based language, by the same token it should not introduce gender-based language where it does not exist. There are three genders in German: the masculine, the feminine, and the neuter. The problem occurs when

we translate terms like *der Mensch* (the human or the human being) or *das Einzelne* (the individual). For if we employ the pronoun "he" in these cases, we are in fact introducing gender-based language that does not exist in Cassirer's text. The concern here is not one of political but of philosophical correctness. When we speak of "the human," we are speaking not of individual human beings but of what it means to be human *qua* human. When speaking of the "individual," the problem is compounded by the fact that Cassirer is at times speaking of *the* individual *qua* individual and at times he is speaking of *an* individual as a unique person. Whereas *the* individual *qua* individual is neither he nor she, *an* individual as a unique person is always he or she. As a basic principle, this translation endeavors not to introduce gender-specific language where it did not already exist. A number of strategies have been employed toward this goal. "*Der Mensch*" is translated as "the human" or "the human being" – the term "man" appears only when it is in an English text quoted by Cassirer or in one of his English works. In some cases, a simple restructuring of the sentence was needed to remove the pronoun or permit a repetition of the noun "the human." Generally, "the human" and "the subject" have received the pronoun "it" and the possessive pronoun "its." In a handful of cases, where it was clear that the subject of the sentence was singular, the word "they," "their," or "themself" has been used as a singular pronoun to refer to the subject or individual of an unspecified gender. This praxis dates back to the sixteenth century and is currently widely employed in informal language usage and more and more in formal contexts. Finally, in a handful of cases where Cassirer was clearly speaking of a concrete individual, both pronouns have been employed since the assumption is that the point being made would be true for women and for men.

The goal of a translation should not be to interpret for the reader but rather to facilitate the reader in undertaking their own interpretation. This said, there is always a degree of interpretation that cannot be avoided. Here is not the place to go through all the reasons for translating a term one way as opposed to another. Other translations are possible, and some choices cannot be made except on the bases of an interpretation of Cassirer's philosophy as a whole, and in some instances, the German has been included in parentheses so that the reader is free to interpret the text differently.

Translator's Introduction

A Transcendental Critique of Mythical-Religious Consciousness: Identity-Thinking, the Natural Attitude, and an Immanence in the Sacred Sense of Life

Steve G. Lofts

Whereas in the treatment of language, Cassirer was able to begin from a long history of philosophical thought and in particular was able to build on the work of Humboldt, in the case of myth, Cassirer's work is pioneering, and he openly acknowledges that it is "at most a beginning." Following Schelling, myth is to be recognized as a formative force of spirit, as a creative principle of world formation and thus examined on its own terms and not as a proto-science, as a weakness of spirit, or as a dark shadow of language: thus, myth possesses its own distinctive logic of sense and its unique function within the construction of the objective and subjective worlds.

As Cassirer points out, however, a transcendental critique of mythical consciousness is a paradoxical undertaking as transcendental philosophy begins with a given factum and inquiries into its condition of possibility. However, by its very nature, mythical consciousness cannot be "given" as a factum, without losing the lived immediacy that defines it. The transcendental analysis necessarily takes place, therefore, from a position that has always already transcended concrete lived mythical consciousness

itself. Mythical-religious consciousness would thus seem to constitute a complex of problems that is fundamentally inaccessible to the exact sciences as well as transcendental philosophy, but without it, whole domains of human experience would be closed off. Heidegger is confronted with a similar paradox in *Being and Time* when he begins his project of fundamental ontology by way of an analysis of the natural attitude of "average everydayness" that forms the ontic immediacy in which Dasein "lives." Heidegger's analysis of everydayness can take place only from a place beyond the immediate absorption of Dasein in the referential totality of significance that forms the environmental world (*Umwelt*). Heidegger himself connects his analysis of average everydayness with Cassirer's analysis of myth. In section 11 of *Being and Time*, "The Existential Analytic and the Interpretation of Primitive Dasein," Heidegger affirms that average everydayness is "the *repetition* and the ontologically more transparent purification of what is ontically discovered" in Cassirer's analysis of myth (BT, 50/51). And in his 1925 seminar, Heidegger states that although

> the task of conceiving Dasein in its everydayness does not mean describing Dasein at a primitive stage of its being . . . often the consideration of primitive forms of Dasein can more readily provide directions in seeing and verifying certain phenomena of Dasein, in-as-much-as here the danger of concealment through the self-interpretation through theory . . . is not yet so powerful. . . . In fact, the analysis we have given of the structure of the environing world could be explained in terms of this particular epistemology of the Marburg School. . . . To be sure, the contrast between the concepts of substance and function, to which the epistemology of the Marburg School attaches particular importance, *has without question permitted us to see something significant.*
>
> (HCT, 200/208)

The laborious work of reconstructive analysis must therefore proceed indirectly, through an analysis of the products of mythical consciousness that are given as factum by way of the ethnological and anthropological studies of cultures other than the one in which the transcendental investigator belongs. At times this gives the impression that mythical thinking is understood by Cassirer as a "primitive stage" of spirit that has – or should be – overcome in the move to the rational life of spirit as exemplified in

science. However, clearly for Cassirer, myth forms a structurally permanent stratum of spirit, and in reading his analysis of myth, it is not difficult to see contemporary examples of the basic dynamics that govern mythical consciousness. Thus, the distinction between "primitive life and culture" and "cultural life" is one between the immediately lived mythical consciousness and the critical and self-reflective mode of consciousness.

In speaking of "*Naturvölker*" (natural people) in contrast to "*Kulturvölker*" (cultural people), Cassirer is taking up the technical language of the anthropology of his day, as it was established by Herder; he is, however, investing that language with a new more precise sense. Granted the category of "*Naturvölker*" (natural people) originally expressed a Eurocentric, colonial ideology: it did so, however, because the term was used to refer to socalled "primitives" socieities or to Aboriginal or Indigenous people. Cassirer does not make this identification. The distinction between "*Naturvölker*" (natural people) and "*Kulturvölker*" (cultural people) for Cassirer, can perhaps be better expressed as the distinction between a concrete immenance in the life-world and a critical reflecive account of the being of the world, between an oral and written tradition. Mythical consciousness lacks a critical self-reflective distance from its own products. It is, therefore, "primitive" in the sense of primal: it forms the fundamental layer of sense of the natural attitude of an absorbed immediacy in the life of sense against which the reflective consciousness must distinguish itself in and through an *Auseinandersetzung* with this primal original state.

It is important to keep in mind the overall structure of Cassirer's "phenomenology of mythical consciousness."[1] There are four stages to Cassirer's analysis: In the first step, he examines myth as a "form of thought" establishing the distinctive logic of sense that determines its basic tendency of object-consciousness and its basic categories. In the second step, he demonstrates the effect of this form of thought on the mythical "form of intuition" in the construction and structuring of the spatiotemporal world of mythical consciousness according to the basic difference that governs mythical consciousness: namely, the opposition between the sacred and the profane. In a third step, Cassirer roots both the mythical form of thought and mythical intuition in a "form of life" that forms the distinctive existence and function of myth as an immanent life in cultural significations that constitutes the

identity of a people grounded in a shared sense of life operating in communal ritual action and given figure in the mana-representation. In the fourth step, Cassirer provides an analysis of the "dialectic of mythical consciousness" that sets out the internal dynamic of mythical consciousness as it moves toward its own overcoming, to "a turning point and a point of return – a point at which the law that governs it becomes a problem."[2] This movement brings out the inner tension and interconnection between what Cassirer calls the "mythical magical" and the "truly religious."

The logic of sense that determines the thought-form of myth levels down (*Nivellierung*) all analytic differences and differences between the image and word and the thing (*Sache*), between the imagined and the perceived, the dream and reality, meaning and being, the whole and the part, the community and the member, etc. into a pure identity that forms one uniform level of being and an immediate concrete presence. This "identity-thinking" is governed by the "law of the concrescence or coincidence of the members of a relation," in which the members flow together and merge into one another:

> The mythical world is not 'concrete' in as much as it has to do only with sensible-objective contents and excludes and repels all merely "abstract" elements, everything that is simply signification and sign – rather, it is concrete because in it the two elements of thing and of signification merge undifferentiatedly into each other, because they are "concretized" here into an immediate coalesced unity.[3]

This identity-thinking levels down the difference between signification and sign, between the spiritual and the material, and thus leads to "a kind of materialization of spiritual contents."[4] In this mythical-substantial-identity-thinking, anything can become anything, and thus the content of mythical thinking is characterized by a constant "metamorphosis," a fluidity or sliding of signification from one moment to the next. This mythical-substantial-identity-thinking is also a form of "structural thinking" that is governed by the logic of *pars pro toto* (a part for the whole): "regardless of how far we divide, we find in each part the form, the structure, of the whole." The part does not represent the whole but "is" the whole itself. Thus, each thing not only belongs-together with

others as members of a whole but shares a common identity through being one with the whole.

This thought-form determines the mode of the mythical intuition of space, time, and number. The basic division between the sacred and the profane structures mythical intuition. The mana-representation and the taboo (two sides of one and the same phenomena) determine all the basic divisions within mythical intuition. Mana has no content. Rather, the mana-representation is a form of predication by which the separation, the spiritual crisis through which the sacred emerges out of the profane, by which the outstanding stands out from the everyday, penetrating it and providing it with its ultimate sense, its *raison d'être*.

The mythical intuition thus posits a boundary that opens up and structures a sacred space of the extraordinary of the nameless and figureless force of life designated in and by the mana-representation over against a profane space of the common, average, and everyday. "In observing the flights of birds, the augur divides the whole of the heavens into different regions, which he designates in advance as sacred precincts, each inhabited and governed by a god."[5] The sense of the sacred thus prefigures all intuition of space as a whole as well as the internal structure of its regions. "The east as the origin of light is also the source and origin of life – the west as the place of the setting sun is filled with all the terrors of death. . . . And this opposition of day and night, light, and darkness, birth and death, is also reflected in the most varied mediations and in the most diverse refractions in the mythical apprehensions of the individual concrete relationships of life."[6] This structural intuition of space according to the mana-representation as an image of the sense of life determines the sense of the spatial organization and orientation of the dwelling space of the human. Hence, for example, "whereas the plan of the [Roman] camp was drawn up according to that of the city, the *city* in turn corresponded in its structure to the general plan of the *world* and the different spatial regions of the world."[7]

The mythical intuition of time is also determined as the sacred time: "The primary mythical 'feeling of phases' can apprehend time only in *the image of life* – and, consequently, it must immediately transpose and dissolve everything that moves in time, everything that comes and goes in a set rhythm, into the form of life."[8] In keeping with its identity-thinking, it reduces all differences in time to an original substantial

origin, to an absolute and immemorial past that functions as the *Ursache*, the originary-thing or originary-cause, as the *Urgrund* of all existence, all history: "The past itself no longer has a 'why': it is the why of things."[9] Everything that we call history is nothing other than the unfolding and rebirth of this prehistorical original event; every historical event is only a stage in the retelling of the beginning as it was written in the beginning: "It is not by its history that the mythology of a people is determined but, conversely, its history is determined by its mythology – or rather, the mythology of a people does not *determine* but *is* itself its fate, its destiny as befallen it from the very beginning. The whole history of the Hindus, the Hellens, and others was given with their system of gods [*Götterlehre*]."[10] The order of time is thus the cosmic power that determines the destiny of a people. It is the different "feelings of time" that constitutes one of the most profound differences in the character of the various religions. Cassirer illustrates this through an analysis of the image of time operating in the Hebraic, Persian, Indian, Chinese, and Egyptian religions.

Finally, everything that possesses the same number is seen as identical in its being (*Wesen*), and each number has its own "individual physiognomy" that determines the nature (*Wesen*) of this being. Cassirer provides numerous examples to illustrate the distinctive symbolic sense of numbers within myth. For example, the entire mythical world possesses a "fourfold (*vierfältige*) organization." Four is the "sacred number" (*heiligen Zahl*) *par excellence*, because it forms "the original actuality of all being – earthly and celestial, human and divine."

The mythical form of thought determines not only the objective form of intuition but also the subjective "form of life." As the symbolic forms undertake the separation, formation, and configuration of the I and the world, Cassirer critiques any form of animism that sees the I or soul as existing before the symbolic process and thus as the source of mythical sense-bestowing; rather, the I-concept and soul-concept are the products of the mythical process that gives expression to an indeterminate life-feeling in and through the construction of a cultural identity. The nameless and imageless life force of the mana is given a gestalt in and through the word and image that form and configure it. Thus, "word magic and picture magic stand in the centre of the mythical worldview":[11] "Word magic, image magic, and writing magic form the basic inventory

[*Grundbestand*] of magical activity and the magical view of the world."[12] In the various objective figures (*Gestalten*) of the totem plant or animal, the figures and names of the gods, and the cultural heroes such as the chieftain or the warrior, the unity of the life force of the mana is concentrated in undiminished strength in each of these mana-representations, and through them the being (*Wesen*) of a people is defined and, by extension, each of the individual members is subjected (*assujetti*) as a member of the community.

It is important to keep in mind that the narrative and pictorial expressions of myth are only the cognitive surface of the mythical form of life. Borrowing from Hegel, Cassirer maintains that not the names and images of the gods but the cult devoted to them determines the real heart of mythical life. The aim of the cult consists in overcoming the separation of the I from the Absolute, to bring about a positive feeling of sharing and participation in the Absolute and a unity with it – this sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the rupture constitutes the sphere of the cult.[13] Thus, "the cult is, 'in general, the eternal process in which the subject posits itself as identical with its being [*Wesen*]."[14] In the dance, for example, the dancer does not represent the god but instead becomes and, in fact, is the god. "The mythical narrative is for the most part only an outward reflection of this inner event, a light veil behind which this drama shines through."[15]

ENDNOTES

1 In a footnote, Cassirer makes clear that phenomenology here is to be understood in the sense given it by Husserl.
2 Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, 285.
3 Ibid., 28.
4 Ibid., 67.
5 Ibid., 308.
6 Ibid., 122.
7 Ibid., 126.
8 Ibid., 134.
9 Ibid., 129.
10 Ibid., 6.
11 Cassirer, *The Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, trans. John Michael Krois (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 80. (*Ernst Cassirer Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, vol. 1, 78).

12 Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, 27.
13 Ibid., 269. Cf. G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, *Werk*, vol. 15 (Leipzig: Meiner Verlag, 1925), 67.
14 Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. 2, 269.
15 Ibid., 227.

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Steve G. Lofts

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Preface

ix A "critique of mythical consciousness," in the sense in which it is attempted in this second volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, must appear not only as a precarious venture but even as a paradoxical one given the present state of critical and systematic philosophy. For, since Kant, the term "critique" has contained in itself the precondition that a factum is given [*vorliegt*] to which philosophical questioning turns – a factum whose distinctive significance and mode of validity philosophy does not create but once it has been encountered is examined for the "condition of its possibility." Is the world of myth, however, a factum of this kind, in any way comparable to the world of theoretical cognition, the world of art, or the world of ethical consciousness? Or does this world not belong from the beginning to the domain of semblance – to that semblance from which philosophy, as a doctrine of being [*Wesen*], ought to remain aloof, in which it should not lose itself but from which, on the contrary, it should ever-more clearly and sharply isolate itself? Indeed, the entire history of systematic philosophy may be regarded as a single continuous struggle to effect an isolation and detachment from this domain. No matter how much the forms of this struggle may change, its basic direction and general tendency clearly and explicitly emerge depending on the stage that theoretical self-consciousness has

achieved. And it is especially in philosophical idealism that this opposition first acquired its full sharpness. In the moment [*Augenblick*] in which idealism arrived at its own concept, in the moment it became conscious of the thought of *being* as its basic and originary problem, the world of myth vanished into the domain of nonbeing. And ever since ancient times, Parmenides' dictum has warned pure thought against entering into this domain, with having any contact with nonbeing or being preoccupied with it, *ἀλλὰ σὺ τῆσδ' ἀφ' ὁδοῦ διζήσιος εἶργε νόημα* [restrain your thought from this way of inquiry].[1] It is as if even though philosophy had long abandoned this warning in its view of the world of empirical perception, it continued to heed it in its view of the world of myth.

Ever since thought had conquered its own realm and its own autonomy, the world of myth would appear to have been overcome and forgotten. Of course, a change seems to have taken place, for in the last century, Romanticism has rediscovered this lost world and since Schelling has attempted to give myth a fixed place within the system of philosophy. The newly awakened interest in myth and in the basic problems of comparative mythology was, however, of greater benefit to the research into its *material content* than it was to a philosophical analysis of its *form*. Thanks to the work done in this domain by systematic religious science, the history of religions, and ethnology, we have abundant material at our disposal. Today, however, the systematic problem of the *unity* of this manifold and heterogeneous material is seldom raised; or if it is raised, one attempts to solve it exclusively with the methods of developmental psychology and general ethnic psychology. Myth is considered as "comprehended" if it is possible to render its source intelligible from certain basic specific predispositions of "human nature" and to demonstrate the psychological rules that it follows in its unfolding from this original germ. If logic, ethics, and aesthetics have been able to assert their own systematic independence against such forms of explanation and deduction, it is because they have been able to evoke an independent principle of "objective" validity that resisted being reduced to psychology. Myth, by contrast, seems to lack any such support and thus appears to have been consigned and abandoned once and for all to psychology but also to psychologism. Insight into the conditions of its origin seems here to be synonymous with the negation of its independent existence [*Bestand*]. x

To understand its content [*Gehalt*], this would seem to signify nothing else than to prove its objective nullity [*Nichtigkeit*] and to see through the general, but nevertheless wholly "subjective," illusion to which it owes its existence.

And yet in this "illusionism" that keeps cropping up – not only in the theory of mythical representing but also in the attempts at a foundation for aesthetics and a theory of art – a grave problem and a grave danger lurk as soon as we consider them from the stand point of a *system* of spiritual forms of expression. For if the totality [*Gesamtheit*] of these forms
xi really constitutes a systematic unity, then the fate of any one of them is closely connected with the fate of all the others. Thus, every negation that affects one must, directly or indirectly, extend to the others; any destruction [*Vernichtung*] of a single member threatens the whole insofar as this whole is regarded not as a mere aggregate but as a spiritual-organic unity. And it becomes immediately evident that myth possesses a decisive significance in and for this whole if we consider the genesis of the basic forms of intellectual culture [*geistigen Kultur*] from that of mythical consciousness. None of these forms possesses from the beginning an independent being [*Sein*] and a clear, actual, and delimited shape; rather, each of them confronts us, as it were, disguised and enshrouded in some shape of myth. There is scarcely any realm of "objective spirit" that cannot be demonstrated to have originally entered into this fusion, this concrete unity, with mythical spirit. The formations [*Gebilde*] of art as well as those of cognition – the contents of ethics, law, language, and technology – all point here to the same basic relationship. The question of the "origin of language" is indissolubly interwoven with the question of the "origin of myth" – both can, if at all, be raised only with one another and in a reciprocal relation to one another. Similarly, the problem of the beginnings of art, the beginnings of writing, and the beginnings of law and science leads back to a stage [*Stufe*] in which they all rest in the immediate and undivided unity of mythical consciousness. Only very gradually do the basic theoretical concepts of cognition – the concepts of space, time, and number; the concepts of law and community, such as the concept of property; or the individual configurations of economics, art, and technology – free themselves from this containment and concatenation. And this genetic interconnection is not apprehended in its original significance and depth so long as it is regarded

and accepted as a *merely* genetic one. As everywhere in the life of spirit, "becoming" points back to a being [*Sein*] without which it cannot be comprehended, without which it cannot be recognized in its distinctive "truth." Psychology itself, in its modern scientific form [*Gestalt*], gives an account of this interconnection: here it has become increasingly evident that genetic problems can never be solved solely by themselves but only in a close connection and thoroughgoing correlation with "structural problems." The emergence of the specific individual formations [*Gebilde*] of spirit from the generality and indifference of mythical consciousness can never be truly understood if this originary-ground itself remains an uncomprehended riddle – if, instead of being recognized as an independent mode of spiritual *forming* [*Formung*], it is rather taken as a figureless [*gestaltlos*] chaos. xii

Grasped in this way, the problem of myth expands beyond the narrow limits of psychology and psychologism and takes its place in that general circle of problems that Hegel has designated as the "phenomenology of spirit." That myth stands in an inner and necessary relationship to the universal task of the phenomenology of spirit follows indirectly from Hegel's own framing and determination of the concept. As Hegel writes in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

> The spirit that, so developed, knows itself as spirit, is *science*. Science is its reality [*Wirklichkeit*] and the realm that it builds itself in its own element [*Elemente*]. . . . The beginning of philosophy presupposes or demands that consciousness find itself in this *element*. This element itself, however, achieves its own perfection and transparency only through the movement of its becoming. It is pure spirituality, as the *universal*, that has the mode of simple immediacy. . . . For its part, science requires that self-consciousness should have raised itself into this aether, in order to be able to live with science and in science – and [so] live. Conversely, the individual has the right to demand that science should at least provide him with a ladder to this standpoint, should show him this standpoint within himself. . . . If the standpoint of consciousness, which knows things in their opposition [*Gegensatze*] to itself, and itself in opposition [*Gegensatze*] to them, is valid for Science as *other* [*Andere*] . . . then, the element [*Element*] of science is for consciousness a distant other word in which it no longer possesses

> itself. Each of these two aspects [of self-conscious spirit] appears to the other as the inversion of truth. . . . Let Science be in its own self what it may, in relationship to immediate self-consciousness it presents itself in an inverted posture; or, because this self-consciousness has the principle of its reality in the certainty of itself, science appears to it not to be actual, since self-consciousness exists on its own account outside of science it bears the form of unreality. Science must therefore unite this element [*Element*] of self-certainty with itself, or rather show *that* and *how* this element belongs to it. So long as Science lacks this reality, it is only the content as the *in-itself* [*Ansich*], the *purpose* that is as yet still something *inward*, not as Spirit, but only spiritual substance. This *in-self* [*Ansich*] has to express itself and become for-itself, and this means simply that it has to posit self-consciousness as with itself. . . . Knowledge in its first phase, or *immediate spirit*, is the spiritualless, i.e.
xiii *sense-consciousness*. In order to become genuine knowledge, to beget the element [*Element*] of Science which is the pure concept of Science itself, it must travel a long way and work its passage.[2]

These sentences, in which Hegel characterizes the relationship of "science" to sense-consciousness, are valid in their full extent and in all their sharpness for the relationship of cognition to mythical consciousness. For the actual point of departure for the entire becoming of science, its beginning in the immediate, does not lie so much in the sensible sphere as it does in the sphere of mythical intuition. What is commonly called sense-consciousness, the consistent existence of the "world of perception" – which is further subdivided into clearly separated individual spheres of perception, into the sensible "elements" [*Elemente*] of color, tone, etc. – is itself the product of an abstraction, of a theoretical elaboration of the "given." Before self-consciousness rises to this abstraction, it is and lives in the formations [*Gebilde*] of mythical consciousness – in a world not so much of "things" and their "properties" but rather of mythical potencies and forces, of daemonic and divine figures [*Gestalten*]. If, in accordance with Hegel's demand, "science" is to provide natural consciousness with a ladder leading to itself, then it must first set this ladder a step lower. Insight into the "becoming" of science – understood in the ideal, not the temporal, sense – is complete only if science demonstrates

its emergence and its own working out from the sphere of mythical immediacy and explains the tendency and law of this movement.

And it is not merely a question here of a requirement that concerns only philosophical systematics; rather, this requirement concerns cognition itself. For cognition does not master myth by exiling it beyond its borders; rather, it is able to truly overcome what it has previously understood only in its own distinctive content [*Gehalt*] and according to its specific nature [*Wesen*]. As long as this spiritual work has not been completed, the battle, which theoretical cognition believes it has won for good, will continually break out anew. Cognition now discovers the opponent that it had seemingly and decisively defeated in its own midst. Even the epistemology of "positivism" provides clear evidence of this state of affairs. The isolation [*Absonderung*] of the purely factual, the factually given from all "subjective" admixture of the mythical or metaphysical spirit, forms here the ultimate goal of reflection. Science arrives at its own form only by expelling every mythical and metaphysical component from itself. And yet the development of Comte's theory precisely shows that those elements and motives that were thought to have already been overcome in the beginning remain alive and effective in it. Comte's system, which began with the banishment of all mythology to the originary-time [*Urzeit*] and prehistory [*Vorzeit*] of science, culminates in a mythical-religious superstructure. Thus, it can after all be seen that between theoretical cognitive consciousness and mythical consciousness there nowhere exists a hiatus in the sense of a sharp *temporal* incision – in the sense asserted in Comte's "law of the three phases" – each separated over against and from the other. xiv

For a long time, science preserves a primordial mythical heritage, to which it merely imprints another form. For the theoretical natural sciences, recalling the centuries-long inconclusive struggle, which continues today, to detach the concept of force from all mythical components, to transform it into a pure concept of function, is sufficient. Here it is not a question of an opposition that breaks forth again into the establishment of the *content* of basic individual concepts but rather a conflict that reaches deep down into the very form of theoretical cognition. How little within this form a truly sharp boundary has been erected between myth and logos proves more than anything else that myth today is also at

home in the domain of pure *methodology* and claims rights [*Bürgerrecht*] for itself. Already the view is explicitly expressed such that no clear logical partition can be made between myth and *history* [*Geschichte*], such that, rather, all historical [*historisch*] comprehension is and must be permeated with mythical elements [*Elemente*] and necessarily bound to them. If this thesis were justified, then not only history [*Geschichte*] but also the entire system of the human sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*] that rests on it as one of its foundations would be withdrawn from the domain of science and entrusted to that of myth. Such encroachments and infringements by myth into the circle of science can be warded off successfully only if we have previously recognized myth in its own sphere according to what it is and is capable of spiritually. Its real overcoming must be based on its cognition and recognition: only through an analysis of its spiritual structure can its distinctive sense and boundary be determined.

xv The more sharply this general task became clear to me over the course of my investigation, the more clearly I perceived the difficulties in the way of carrying it out. Even less than for the problems in the philosophy of language treated in the first volume, did a sure path or even a partially blazed trail exist here. If in the case of language, a systematic consideration could – from the standpoint of method if not of content – build on Wilhelm von Humboldt's seminal investigations, in the domain of mythical thinking there were no such methodological "guidelines." The plethora of material that the research of the last decades had brought to light offered no compensation; on the contrary, it made the lacuna of a systematic insight into the "inner form" of mythology all the more evident. The present investigation hopes to advance along a path leading to such an insight – I am, however, far from supposing that it has reached the end of this path. It by no means claims to be conclusive but rather claims to be at most a beginning. Only once the framing of the question that is attempted here is taken up and carried further in progressive work, not only in systematic philosophy but also in the individual scientific disciplines – in particular, in the history of religion and ethnology – can it be hoped that the aim that this investigation originally set itself will be achieved.

The first drafts and other preliminary work for this volume were already far advanced when, through my call to Hamburg, I came into close contact with the Warburg Library. I found in its abundant and

particular nature almost incomparable material in the domain of mythology and the general history of religion, but in its organization and selection, in the intellectual stamp that Warburg gave it, this material dealt with a unitary and central problem closely related to the basic problem of my own work. This correspondence provided me with new incentive to continue along the path on which I had begun – for it suggested that the systematic task undertaken by this book is intimately connected to tendencies and demands that are the outgrowth of concrete work in the human sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*] and of an endeavor to deepen and reinforce their historical foundations. In my use of the Warburg Library, Fritz Saxl provided me with helpful and expert guidance. I am fully cog- xvi
nizant that without his active help and the lively personal interest that he showed in my work from the beginning, many difficulties in obtaining and penetrating the material could scarcely have been overcome. I should not wish this book to appear without this expression of my heartfelt gratitude.

Hamburg, December 1924
Ernst Cassirer

ENDNOTES

1 [Parmenides, *Fragment 7*.]
2 [G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 12 – trans. amended.]

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INTRODUCTION

The Problem of a "Philosophy of Mythology"

1.

The philosophical consideration of the *contents* of mythical consciousness and the attempt at a theoretical apprehension and interpretation of these contents go back to the beginnings of systematic philosophy. Philosophy turned its attention to myth and its formations [*Gebilde*] earlier than to other domains of culture. This is historically and systematically understandable, for it was in the confrontation [*Auseinandersetzung*] with mythical thinking that philosophy first succeeded in advancing to a precise framing [*Fassung*] of its own concept and a clear consciousness of its own task. Wherever philosophy sought to constitute a theoretical consideration and explanation of the world, it was confronted not so much by the immediate appearance of reality itself but rather by the mythical apprehension and recasting [*Umprägung*] of this reality. It did not – at least not without the decisive contribution of philosophical reflection itself – encounter "nature" in the configuration that it would acquire in a later period, characterized by a highly developed and worked-out consciousness of experience, but rather, all the shapes [*Gestalten*] of existence appeared shrouded in the atmosphere of mythical thinking and fantasy. Nature receives its form and color, receives its specific determination, only through these shapes. Long before the world is given to consciousness as a totality [*Ganze*] of empirical "things" and a complex of